

# Book Review

**A Girl and Her Room**, by Rania Matar, New York: Umbrage Editions, 2012.

REVIEWED BY MEHRNOUSH SHAFIEI

Rania Matar has done the impossible. Her photographic project is a grand undertaking by any measure; as the title suggests, she has managed to capture an elusive space that is at once fiercely protected and highly meaningful. She has succeeded in photographing girls in their real-life bedrooms with an unflinching gaze that feels neither invasive nor exploitative. Part of the book's power derives from the fact that Matar fully gained the trust of her subjects and was privy to their private worlds. This trust allows her to deliver a powerful précis of a life transition that sits uncomfortably astride two distinct life phases – the liminal space between girlhood and womanhood. Matar's lens brings the fuzzy tension that exists in-between into focus and gives readers a visceral photographic narrative of this transitional 'moment.'

The choice of bedroom as setting is telling; this is a space where the girls have a unique ability to exert a certain degree of control and autonomy. The effect is candid and revealing. *A Girl and Her Room* was inspired by Matar's own home, when she was photographing her own teenage daughters. Observing them and their friends she became intrigued with how these young girls construct images of self vis-à-vis their bedrooms. This led to a desire to distill the set of associative expectations and tensions that accompany the very idea of being a 'girl.' In many ways, there is a subtle acknowledgement by the subjects themselves that there is something significant to be captured, a tacit recognition they are worthy of observation. Arielle from Massachusetts: "As teenagers we are surrounded by judgment, responsibility, confusion, pressure, and the desire to break free from all these stresses in society. My room is a place where I go to escape these burdensome feelings and just relax".

The aesthetic tenor of the photographs oscillates between various degrees of subversiveness; some are clearly defiant, some more guarded. Some exude confidence, marked by a physical and sartorial ease as they face the camera directly, while others only display timid, awkwardly turned-in feet. Despite this gradient, there is palpable similarity to all of the photographs – a distinct steeliness, even as some girls appear shy and demure.

The 132 pages of captions and images capture a gendered moment in time – the images tell us far more about the transition that is taking place than pages of description could do. To anchor the pictures in a conversation about gender, youth and selfhood, the book includes two relatively short prefatory essays by Susan Minot and Anne Tucker. Taken together, they are a powerful combination.

## Across Borders

Since the order of the photographs vacillates easily between Lebanon and the United States, it is impossible to write about Matar's book without considering geography. An anthropological reading of the images reveals the high degree of overlap between the local and global in terms of self-representation and ideas of femininity. The images work in tandem and the landscapes diffuse into each other, producing what appears to be a seamless narrative. Many times, the reader cannot readily pinpoint the location on a given page until examining the caption, an effect Matar consciously pursued.

Some images capture wonderfully frou-frou bedrooms that are filled, almost to brimming with cotton-candy pinks and purples. Other rooms are bare. Though some rooms appear more cluttered than others, the global hegemonic culture is all present in this book. Amal, who lives in a Palestinian refugee camp, has a relatively naked room save for a closet decorated by cutout stickers of Disney pop star Hanna Montana. "I LOVE Hanna Montana and Selena Gomez...I love that they are pretty and successful and that they dress nice. I wish I looked like them and hope I can be famous someday". Certain objects are repeated across rooms and borders,

and in their repetition become swollen with meaning. Posters, nail polish, makeup, books and photographs all serve as general points of commonality between the girls' rooms. The most commonly repeated object is the mirror; the ultimate symbol of reflection, literally and figuratively. The objects are not the only points of commonality. A close reading of the captions reveals how the girls are similarly grappling with proscribed societal roles – the pressure to get married, to live up to standards of beauty, and to adopt outward displays of religiosity.

### Material Girls

One of the most interesting functions of the book is that it examines the highly complex relationship between object and self in the framing of identity and selfhood. Matar's book ultimately drives home the idea that the transition is rooted in an earthly materialism. Indeed, *A Girl and Her Room* reveals a certain Proustian pleasure in objects – the very room itself is given equal status with the subject being photographed. Objects are insignia, and reflect an imagined sense of self.

The book's strength lies in its ability to draw attention to how objects are displayed in order to both mask and ventriloquize the girls' own 'girlness.' For instance, the photo chosen as the cover of the book is striking for its juxtaposition of a soft lilac-colored toy and a flashy fuchsia bra. Here uneasy anxieties are unpacked as traditional emblems of femininity are displayed in contrast with objects of childhood. Matar brilliantly captures the unresolved sense that the girls are torqued by forces that simultaneously restrain them in their girlhood and propel them into womanhood. Becca P. Brookline from Massachusetts sums this up: "I am a 'girly girl'. I like being with friends, watching movies, reading. I LOVE hair, makeup, clothes, and boys. Sometimes I want to be treated like an adult and sometimes like a six-year-old". Matar's phenomenological approach, wittingly or unwittingly, recalls architectural research trends that focus on how the inanimate 'things' that make up our environment are vital clues in understanding human cognition and development. Michael Arbib refers to such a relationship as "extended phenotype".

Through the lens of an "extended phenotype," you can perhaps understand to a certain degree the continuum that exists between the bedrooms even while they are oceans apart. Anna F. of Winchester, Massachusetts articulates a rather sophisticated awareness: "My room was always a place independent of the world, geographically and temporally ambiguous, floating separate from the rest of my life and creating an architectural womb were I was most myself".

Perhaps Matar's training as an architect influenced this understanding in some way. As the photographer concedes in a personal statement at the end of the book, "The room was a metaphor, an extension of the girl, but also the girl seemed to be part of the room, to fit in, just like everything else in the room".

What is remarkable about the book is that Matar manages to problematize the idea of 'girl' as an identity that is unified or homogenous, even as many of the pictures appear strikingly similar. It is precisely in the variety of ways that girlhood can be acted out that Matar drives home the idea that the continuity is linked to a shared set of experiences and a loaded materialism. Taken individually, the girls are all unique and memorable, even as the forces acting on them are revealed to be the same. Womanhood (gender) is embodied and though the bedroom is a private setting, being a girl is not a solely private concern – it is a gendered experience, very much acted out socially.

In the final analysis, Matar shows that these are gendered rooms, gendered selves.